

MY SAILOR BOY



BY H.J. ASHCROFT
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WELL, we can understand Musgrave's marrying, but you, Drake, such a blatant misogynist, to fall a prey to a petticoat—

"There's where you're wrong, old man," I said; "it wasn't a petticoat."
"Wasn't a petticoat?" exclaimed my friend.
"Not a bit of it. You know I'd forsworn petticoats."
"How the deuce did you get married then?"
"Thereby hangs a tale," I remarked. And I told it.

It came about through Jack Musgrave's falling over head and ears in love with Eva Beauchamp—a common or garden party attachment. The affair, however, put on a different complexion later; for it appeared that Eva's papa and Jack's governor were on terms of the bitterest enmity.

There were six training ships on the River Thames, so I shall not be personal in referring to one of them under a fictitious name. Captain Beauchamp commanded the *Grampus*, and during his earlier career in the navy his superior officer, Commander Musgrave, had reported him for some dereliction of duty, whereby his prospects were blighted. So that our Romeo and Juliet had parental Montagues and Capulets to thwart their love.

It does not naturally follow that the commander of a training ship should be a cross-grained martinet, though the life may be conducive to such a development; but the captain of the *Grampus* was an autocrat of the good old school. His daughter, however, possessed a sweet little will of her own, and refused to be the slave of her arrogant father. She was a handsome blonde, and proved herself to be as sweet and gentle as she was devoted and determined.

When the old man heard of the engagement he fumed and made the atmosphere of the battleship a bit suffocating; but as soon as his fury had effervesced itself into a state of calm he chuckled and thanked his stars he lived on a vessel moored out on the river and not ashore. He was captain of the *Grampus* and could rule all aboard with an iron hand. No medieval Baron could have dealt more effectively with a recalcitrant daughter than it was in his power to do. So Eva was locked in her stateroom at night and confined to the ship during the day. He vowed he'd bring the girl to her senses.

Musgrave took me into his confidence; his great wish was to find some means of communicating with Eva.
"We ought to be able to manage that," I said. "My boat is moored under the stern of the *Grampus* and I've often seen Miss Beauchamp standing on the gallery. Come and spend a few days aboard and we'll try and open up communication with her."

He did so, and Miss Beauchamp soon recognized him. It was rather a quaint balcony scene—Juliet leaning over the rail of the stern gallery of the old warship and Romeo (in a sou'wester) serenading her in dumb show from my dingy. He was eager to instruct and she quick to learn, and a post was established by means of a fishing line suspended from her stateroom window.

"With discreet fellow like myself acting as Postmaster General, this clandestine correspondence was carried on successfully. The first letters that passed were merely silly protestations of love and did not concern me, but presently Eva was treating her shamefully, and she could no longer tolerate the indignities of her position. Her cousin Midge was coming on a visit, and they would take counsel together.

A second young lady appeared on the stern gallery the next day—a piquant little brunette—an affectionate and insouciant creature, to judge from her bearing. I was not wrong in thinking that this little Midge would bring matters to a crisis. That night's post brought us the following from Eva:
"My cousin and I have seriously discussed my position, and I have resolved to put an end to this intolerable captivity. Escape is most difficult, as there is always an officer on watch to prevent the boys from deserting. We hope, however, some opportunity will aid us."
We discussed the matter half through the night, and the result of our deliberations was that Musgrave asked her to elope with him, so that they could be married at once. This she agreed to do, and asked Jack to help them to escape from the ship, stipulating that Midge was to come, too, for she would not leave her cousin to meet her father's wrath, nor would Midge leave the ship until she had got safely away.

This step decided on we made our plans. I wrote to the captain in the name of a fellow clubman whose yacht lay further down the river, asking to be supplied with a couple of time-expired lads. The ship, I knew, was always glad to find berth for the boys, and I received a reply stating that two reliable lads were at my disposal and awaiting instructions to join the yacht. Of course we were acting in collusion with Eva, and after communicating with her, fixed a certain evening on which to call for the boys. In the meantime the girls had to arrange their difficult and trying escape, and Jack to see to his part of the contract. Our anxiety was lightened by our knowledge of the fact that the boys on the ship liked Eva as much as they hated the captain, and I had little doubt that the bewitching Midge would soon surround herself with a train of loyal courtiers.

We moved the yacht half a mile down the river, and there waited the eventful day. My man Rogers, being a trustworthy fellow, was taken in our confidence. He grinned. "I've seen some rum starts in my time, sir, but this beats all." Rogers was familiar, but he was loyal; and as a matter of fact it was a bit un-

conventional, though that was not our fault.

I am ready to admit that I funked going aboard the *Grampus* for those "boys" I told Jack it was clearly his duty, but he excused himself on the ground that he might be recognized. He remained in the boat while I ran up the accommodation ladder and stepped through the gangway, where a petty officer was standing guard.

"My boys ready?" I asked.
"Oh, let me see, you're from the yacht. Yes, I think they're ready, str. Here, boy, run down and send Davis and Wood on deck."

I desired to get on friendly terms with the officer, so produced my cigar case. It was all I could do. Had it been possible I would have stood him as much whisky as he could swallow, regarding the expense as nothing.

Two boys came on deck with their kit-bags. There had been a bit of a shower a few minutes before, so they had their sou'westers on.

"Now, then, are you ready, there?"

"You're keeping the gentleman waiting," said the officer.
"Half a minute, sir, if you don't mind," said one of them. The other young beggar actually winked at me. Two other young fellows took the bags down to the boat, while my two dived below.
"More farewells, I suppose," I said to the officer, with a smile. Some youngsters were skylarking aloft—doubtless with a purpose—and their daring gymnastics caught the officer's attention. He took a few steps forward and shouted for them to come down, which they did not appear anxious to do. Just then the two boys reappeared, and skipping across the deck, descended the ladder. They had their sou'westers pulled well over their faces, and their oilskin coats were thrown over their shoulders. I followed hastily, leaving the officer rating the skylarkers. He came to the gangway as we were entering the boat, and hurled some sarcasm at the boys for wearing oilskins now the rain had stopped, and also passed disparaging remarks at their want of smartness in tumbling into the dingy. It must have struck the fellow as being strange that the boys sat at while Jack and I took the oars. In fact, I saw a puzzled look come into his face, and heard him utter an exclamation of surprise. He evidently thought something strange was happening.

We bent our backs to our work and sent the little boat flying over the water. Our two new hands sitting on the stern-bench did not have the appearance of rollicking young sea-dogs. Poor girls, they had been through a trying ordeal. Eva was deathly pale and not far off fainting, I imagined. Midge had stood the strain best, and now clasped Eva's hand tightly in hers, and in many mute little ways tried to cheer and comfort her cousin. As we increased the distance between us and the *Grampus* her eyes brightened, and her face caught the flush of excitement. She did not allow her embarrassment to overpower her, as did Eva, but seemed to catch the true spirit of adventure and rise upon it. As I watched her little flushed face peeping from beneath the sou'wester, I was forced to admit that for the first time in my life I was aloft with a girl who harmonized with her surroundings. You're a plucky little girl, Miss Midge," I thought.
"They are not chasing us, are they?" she asked me.
"No, no," I answered, reassuringly, "we've completely given them the slip."
"Hurrah!" she cried.
We soon arrived alongside the *Lilith* and found Rogers had everything ready

for a start. There was a nice whole-sail breeze from the westward, and in a few minutes the yacht was under way, hurrying seaward.

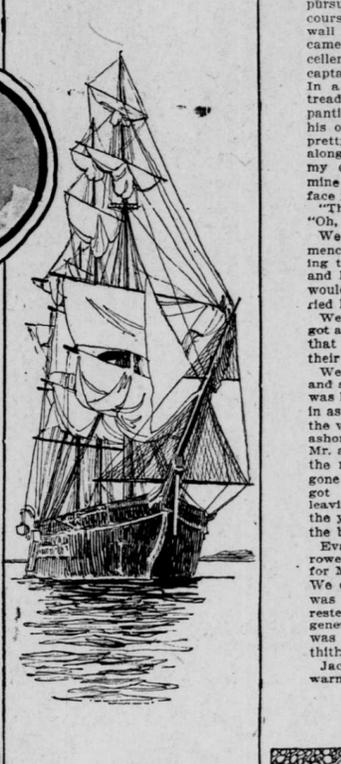
Musgrave gave a sigh of relief, and the tension of his features relaxed. "So far, so good, Jack," I said.
"You're a good fellow, Drake," he remarked, "and your nerves are like iron." I did not tell him what a miserable funk I'd been in aboard the *Grampus*. The girls had retired to the after cabin to attire themselves more conventionally. The skylight was opened an inch or so for ventilation, and I heard Midge chattering as I stood at the tiller. Then I heard Eva utter an exclamation of dismay, and her cousin exclaimed, "Oh, goodness! A silence followed—broken by Midge's rippling laughter. Evidently nothing very serious had happened. Presently Eva said, "You have my dress, Midge," and the reply came, "Certainly not, Eva. I'm all right as I am—I don't care." Jack came aft.

"There's something wrong with the wardrobe," I said, nodding toward the ladies' cabin. In a few minutes Eva's head appeared at the companion, and Jack ran to her.
"Oh, Jack," I heard her say, "those stupid boys have made such a terrible mistake. They packed their bags intending to escape later in the evening, and somehow Midge's bag got mixed with theirs, and now she finds that she has got Wood's things, and I suppose he has got hers. What shall we do?"
I admit it was most heartless conduct on my part, but really I could not help laughing up my sleeve. I, who knew I had not felt that the rogish Midge would be overpowered by the contempt. If it had been Eva who had lost her bag, I should have been sorry for her.

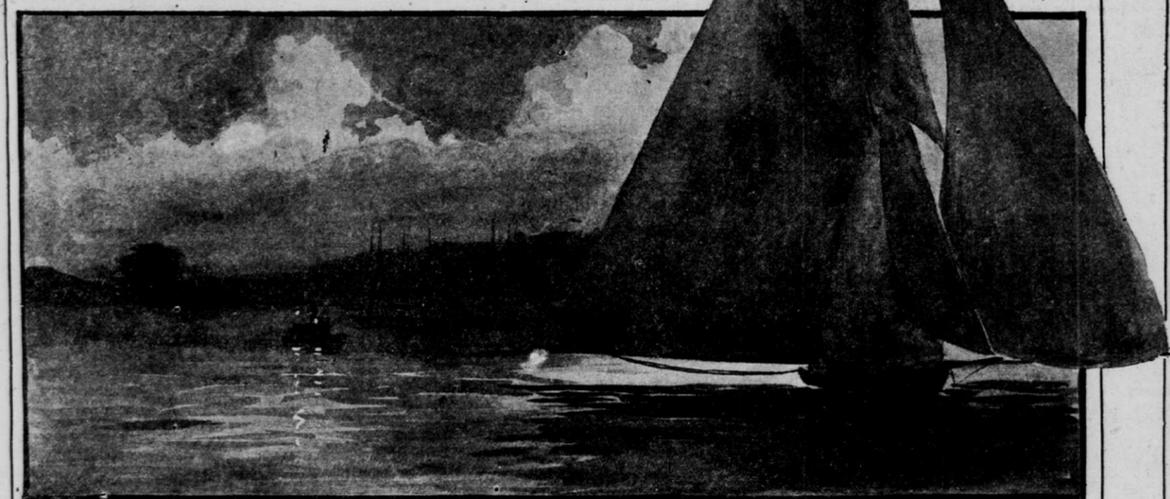
On a strong ebb tide, and with the wind dead aft, we made a good ten knots past the land. The night was clear, and we should have the moon presently. One thing was certain—none of the ship's boats could overtake us while the breeze held. I began to feel hungry, which was a sure sign my anxiety was wearing off. Rogers came aft, and I went down to tea.
Eva was looking pale and interestingly distraught, but she gave me a generous smile and offered her hand. I was always a lout with women, but to show how impregnated I was by the spirit of romance, I bent down and kissed her fingers. Think of that, ye fair damsels who have flouted Midge! Jack was quite affected. I expected our sailor boy (with the very uniform suggest-



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"CAPTAIN BEAUCHAMP COMMANDED THE GRAMPUS"



THE CHASE OF THE LILITH.



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ed impudence) to laugh, but she didn't. She gave me quite a respectful glance, then threw her arms around Eva's neck and kissed her. She was a sympathetic and affectionate little rogue.

We got quite cozy and companionable over the tea-table. There is something in the very smallness of a cabin that seems to bring you all physically and psychically close together—and I dare say you've noticed it. Where have you any snugger times than in a yacht's cabin? You see you're altogether out of the world. Midge was just charming—a captivating little burlesque sailor boy. No *Grampus* uniform had ever before been so graced; and certainly no man-o'-war hat had ever perched more daintily above such a bright little face, or tried in vain to cover such obstinate masses of wavy brown hair.

I reluctantly went on deck to relieve Rogers, but presently Midge joined me. "Two's company—you know the rest, Mr. Drake," she said.
"I don't care about the rest, Miss

Sure enough there were three bright lights—red, green and white—following in our wake. They seemed to be glaring at us like a hound in pursuit of its prey.

"Are they chasing us?" asked Midge.
"Call Mr. Musgrave, Rogers."
Jack came on deck, and his countenance fell as he saw the vessel astern.
"Drake," he said, "whatever happens they are not going to take Eva away."
"No, they shall not," said the fierce little Midge. "They can't, Mr. Drake, can they?"
"We'll do our best to give them the slip," I answered, "but they have got the advantage of us in speed."
The tug drew up when her bow was overlapping our quarter, a gruff voice hailed, "What yacht is that?"
Rogers, with a capability for ready lying that did him credit, answered, "Fleur de Lys, Gravesend for Harwich."
"That can't be her," I heard some one say sotto voce.

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"Jack," I said, "if we can only put Beauchamp on a false scent, you and Eva will be safe. There's no time to be lost; listen to me. You and Eva go on by the side of the creek, and you can either walk to the village or get a barge to take you to Raglesham in his boat. You will be sure to find several barges off the brick fields yonder. Midge and I will decoy Beauchamp northward toward Foulness; then we'll give him the slip and return aboard again before the tide has had time to flow."
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"You must, Eva," said Midge. "Don't trouble a bit about me, and besides I can't go into civilization like this. Don't ruin everything, Eva."
"Jack, we must not leave her," Eva pleaded.
"Don't be silly," said Midge, and flinging her arms around Eva's neck kissed her good-by.

We crossed the dry mouth of the creek and hurried north along the sands. Our pursuers sighted us and changed their course. Presently we mounted the seawall and across its summit until we came to some sailings that afforded excellent cover. Being out of sight of the captain, we took refuge in a grey gully. In a few minutes we heard the heavy tread of feet and the muttered curses of his officers passed. The old man seemed pretty well done up and dragged himself along painfully. As they passed I felt my companion thrust her arm through mine and the moonlight fell upon a little face plaintive in its excitement.
"Thank goodness, he's gone," she said. "Oh, how my heart is beating!"
We waited a few minutes, then commenced our walk back. Midge was feeling the effects of fatigue and excitement and leaned rather heavily on my arm. I would have gladly picked her up and carried her.

"Well, to get to the end of my yarn, we got aboard the yacht and told Rogers how that the runaway couple had made good their escape.
We got the yacht off as the tide flowed and sailed round to Raglesham. The tug was lying at anchor with her crew turned in as we got under way. Bringing up off the village at about 9:29 o'clock, I hurried ashore and was met at the causeway by Mr. and Mrs. Musgrave. They had spent the night in the village of Barling, and gone on to Raglesham in the morning and got married as per arrangement. On leaving the church the welcome sight of the yacht sailing serenely up the river in the bright sunshine met their gaze.
Eva ran up to the vicarage and borrowed some attire from the vicar's wife for Midge, and then we all went aboard. We congratulated the happy pair, but it was easy to see that a shadow of anxiety rested on the bride's face. I guessed its genesis our cause. The wedding breakfast was to be given at the vicarage and thither we all presently repaired.
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"Midge," I said, "do you know the kind of gift (that is if it can be called a gift) that Eva would most value this morning—a mutual affair, you know?"
"No, Mr. Drake; at least I'm not quite sure," she answered, casting her eyes on the ground.
"Don't we seem to have known each other for a lifetime, Midge? Of course, if circumstances were otherwise I would not be so particular. But when we meet Eva can I tell her you and I have agreed to sign articles?"
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